

The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship

David John Buerger, (Smith Research Associates, San Francisco, 1994)

I picked up and read Buerger's book because it promised, according to its index, to say something about creation theology. His index shows he saw a dual theological path in Mormonism, a creation and a salvation theology (pp. 230, 232). Is he speaking of the same "creation theology" as described in the New Age vision of Matthew Fox? In essence, yes. He discusses the role the creation plays in informing Mormon understanding of the nature and purpose of life. That understanding, in turn, leads to a very positive view of humanity and its potential and destiny.

The book, in this context, cites some very vivid words about the nature of God, the nature of humans, and how they are of one species.

The "creation theology" discussion involves a review of the influences that led to the formulation of the temple ritual (p. 41):

A good place to begin such an investigation is the framework of the ceremony which, as Elder James Talmage has indicated in *The House of the Lord* (1912), retells the plan of salvation—the Creation, Fall, and Atonement. As a culmination of Smith's theology that human beings are the offspring of God and potential gods, the temple provided a synthesis of Mormon beliefs

in the origin and purpose of men and women as well as a sacred ritual that reunited them with God and each other. This instructional material is drawn directly from scripture introduced by Smith in his revision of the Bible, pertinent sections of which are now published in the books of Moses and Abraham.

The salient point here is the idea that the fall is not as serious an impediment to returning to God now that the temple endowment is available to essentially undo it (thanks to Christ's action on the cross and in the Garden of Gethsemane).

The author on pages 42 and 43 acknowledges that the "list of resemblances" between ancient mystery religion's and cults' rites and the temple ceremony "is provocative" but then argues that these were not among the sources used by Joseph Smith. Page 43:

In short ancient sources cannot be considered a direct influence on Smith except as they were revealed to him from a time predating corruption or except as they appear in the ancient scriptures he brought forth. . . .

On page 56 the author acknowledges borrowings from Masonic ritual, citing at one point a famous quote from a Mormon Apostle to the effect that Joseph had restored true Masonry to the earth, a true rite lost in the days of Solomon and David. The book goes on to explain that the rituals were expanded and developed well beyond its Masonic borrowings.

On page 80 the Mormon notion of the Fall being something

desirable and necessary is hinted at by the author describing Eve as the one whose creation "enables the Fall." The temple ritual thereafter is all about how to win "readmittance into the Father's presence." This is a positive thing, dependent both on the person's dedication to the task as on God. The depraved fallen human totally dependent on God's grace for salvation has no place in this theology. Humans are capable of doing good and are empowered to do good and contribute to their salvation as well as to the salvation of others. This introduces a positive view of human nature, and is much closer to creation spirituality than to normative Christianity's salvation spirituality which typically is accompanied by a very negative view of human nature: as if saying that there is innate goodness in fallen humans is to detract from the goodness of God.

To show just how positive this view of human nature was in the minds of earlier leaders of Mormonism, I will focus on one aspect of Mormon practice that apparently existed during the nineteenth century but was done away with in the twentieth: the second endowment ceremony that made a man a God at some point in the next life.

Every Mormon worthy to enter the temple receives a conditional promise that through faith and striving he or she may receive exaltation. If a couple is married in the eternal marriage ceremony and is faithful to the end they may be assured exaltation to godhood. This is common knowledge.

What is not common knowledge, according to Buerger, is that during the 1840's a secret (sacred) second endowment was instituted for those particularly faithful and devoted. It made

an almost unconditional promise of exaltation to godhood for themselves and their posterity.

Buerger discusses the history and ramifications of the second endowment on his pages 110 through 127. On pages 123 and 124 he shows that some of its key precepts were incorporated into the revelation now published as Section 132 of the scriptural book known as the *Doctrine & Covenants*. That Section promises godhood to those who enter into the ‘celestial marriage’ (eternal monogamous marriage now; eternal monogamous or plural marriage then) covenant and either endure to the end (remain faithful to the end of their lives) or receive this second blessing which guarantees exaltation to godhood.

It is not important to me to try and document all this, Buerger does an excellent and respectful job of it. My point is to show that the Mormon idea of God is very physical: men become Gods in the hereafter and Gods have once been men on this or other worlds.

I mention men only because women are also elevated to godhood, as helpers to their husbands who obtain Godhood. I have written about that elsewhere on this site and do not want to belabor the point of this theology’s sexism, now, and its misogyny during the polygamous years.

Where I do want to go with this discussion is Buerger’s citation of a speech made in the Saint George, Utah, temple by Brigham Young, and repeated subsequently by others, that tells a story about the nature of God in Mormon thought. This is excerpted from a fuller account on pages 111 and 112 of

Buerger's book:

In the creation the Gods entered into an agreement about forming this earth, and putting Michael or Adam upon it. These things of which I have been speaking are what are termed the mysteries of godliness but they will enable you to understand the expression of Jesus, made while in Jerusalem, "This is life eternal that they might know thee, the on[l]y true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." We were once acquainted with the Gods and lived with them, but we had the privilege of taking upon us flesh that the spirit might have a house to dwell in.

Already here we have a picture of a very physical place where spirits, individuals already, mingle with the Gods who are of the same species, just having gone through several metamorphoses, the first one being our birth onto the Earth. Young then explained that Adam was made of dust, as the Bible says, but . . .

Well he was made of the dust of the earth but not of this earth. He was made just the same way that you and I are, but on another earth. Adam was an immortal being when he came on this earth

Young explains that through faithful living he received his exaltation and was numbered among the Gods. Perhaps there is an error in the transcript Buerger is citing, perhaps not, but it says that Adam

. . . had begotten all the spirit that was to come to this

earth. And Eve . . . bore these spirits in the celestial world.

Note that it says "spirit that was" and not "spirits that were," so I think the transcript is correct and did not simply lose an "s." The point is that somehow there is a spiritual harvesting process, and then a spirit birthing process. There is a separate sphere of activity for men and women who are G(g)ods!

. . . Adam like all other men had the seed within him to propagate his species, but not the Woman; she conceives the seed but does not produce it;

Young makes somewhat clear that he is talking about the immortal physical beings when he thereafter explains how these immortals changed themselves into mortals so that human life might be:

. . . upon partaking of the fruits of the earth while in the garden and cultivating the ground their bodies became changed from immortal to mortal

The Young lecture was discontinued. According to Buerger, it was recognized to be a speculative innovation (p. 113) on Young's part.

What is the point? That there is an extreme position that literally says that humans are the offspring of Gods and are destined, if they live right and believe right, to become Gods like their Divine Parents. But let us not forget also that the same Mormonism, the same Young even, that brought this extreme vision also brought the mystical vision cited in the

review just before this one (on the book chapter "God" by B.H. Roberts).

I will expand on that "other side" of this coin in the following review and show that Mormonism indeed bridges the chasm between the two extremes of opinions on the God-nature.